



**Facultade de Filoloxía**  
**Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas**

**Metaphor in idiom acquisition.**  
**An empirical analysis across L1 and L2 varieties**  
**of English**

La metáfora en la adquisición de expresiones idiomáticas. Un  
análisis empírico en las variantes del inglés nativo e inglés  
como lengua extranjera

A metáfora na adquisición de expresións idiomáticas. Un  
análise empírico nas variantes do inglés nativo e inglés como  
lingua estranxeira

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	5
Acknowledgements	9
List of Abbreviation	10
List of Tables and Figures	11
0. Introduction	12
1. The nature of idioms	13
1.1. Definition and classification.	13
1.2. Traditional vs cognitive view of idioms	19
2. Idiom processing	23
2.1. Idiom in L1	23
2.2. Idiom in L2	27
2.2.1. L2 Idiom acquisition	27
2.2.2. The question of avoidance	33
2.2.3. Pedagogical implications	34
3. Empirical analysis: Fire as emotion metaphor across native and non-native varieties of English	39
3.1. Aims and research questions	39
3.2. Methodology, corpora and data extraction	40
3.3. Procedure	41
3.4. Discussion of results	47
3.4.1. Research question 1	47
3.4.2. Research question 2	50
3.4.3. Research question 3	52
4. Conclusions and suggestions for further research	58

5. References	63
6. Appendix section	66

## **Abstract**

The teaching and learning of idioms have recently received attention in Cognitive Linguistics literature, most notably in Cognitive Semantics (cf. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Gibbs, 1993, 1994; Kövecses & Szabó, 1999, 2001; Boers, 2011; Ruiz de Mendoza & Pérez-Hernández, 2011). Broadly, cognitive accounts argue that the meaning of most idioms is systematically motivated by underlying conceptual mechanisms such as metaphor and metonymy. The goal of this BA thesis is to explore idioms from a metaphoric perspective and to show how they are acquired and used across L1 and L2 varieties of English, highlighting the importance of metaphoric competence (MC) in the processes of teaching and learning. Particular attention will be paid to metaphorical idioms, comparing traditional and cognitive semantic approaches and tackling such issues as the development of metaphor interpretation and production skills in L1, the relationship between metaphor interpretation and production skills in L1 and L2, as well as the MC contribution to the understanding and interpretation of idioms and the problems involved in L1-L2 transfer. In addition, an empirical analysis will be provided examining parallelisms and divergences in the use of metaphorical idioms across L1 and L2 varieties of English. Ultimately, this study is intended to shed light into the active metaphorical thinking process that takes place in L1 to facilitate both the learning and use of metaphor-based idioms in L2.

**Keywords:** metaphor, idioms, Cognitive Linguistics, Cognitive Semantics, conceptual metaphor, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphoric competence, source domain, target domain, conceptual fluency, figurative language.

## **Resumen**

En los últimos años la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de expresiones idiomáticas han recibido gran atención en el campo de la lingüística cognitiva, especialmente en la semántica cognitiva (cf. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Gibbs, 1993,1994; Kövecses & Szabó, 1999, 2001; Boers, 2011; Ruiz de Mendoza & Pérez-Hernández, 2011). En líneas generales, una explicación cognitiva sostiene que el significado de la mayoría de las expresiones idiomáticas es motivado por una serie de mecanismos conceptuales subyacentes como por ejemplo la metáfora y la metonimia. El objetivo de esta tesis es el de explorar las expresiones idiomáticas desde una perspectiva metafórica y así demostrar cómo son adquiridas tanto por hablantes nativos del inglés como por hablantes de inglés como lengua extranjera; al mismo tiempo que se subrayará la importancia de la competencia metafórica en el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje. Particularmente se prestará atención a las expresiones metafóricas, comparando las perspectivas semánticas tradicionales y cognitivas, y tratando a su vez temas como el desarrollo de la interpretación de la metáfora y las habilidades para su producción por hablantes nativos del inglés; la relación entre la interpretación de la metáfora y su producción por hablantes nativos y estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera; la contribución de la competencia metafórica al aprendizaje e interpretación de las expresiones idiomáticas, así como los problemas que esto conlleva en la transferencia entre ambas variedades de la lengua inglesa, es decir, la nativa y la utilizada por estudiantes de inglés en lengua extranjera. Por último, este estudio intenta arrojar cierta luz sobre el proceso activo del pensamiento metafórico que tiene lugar en la lengua del hablante nativo para facilitar tanto el aprendizaje como el uso de las expresiones idiomáticas basadas en metáforas por los hablantes de inglés como lengua extranjera.

**Palabras clave:** metáfora, expresións idiomáticas, Lingüística Cognitiva, Semántica Cognitiva, metáfora conceptual, Teoría da Metáfora Conceptual, competencia metafórica, dominio da fonte, dominio do concepto, fluidez conceptual, linguaxe figurativo.

## **Resumo**

Nos últimos anos a ensinanza e o aprendizaxe de expresións idiomáticas están a recibir gran atención no campo da lingüística cognitiva, especialmente na semántica cognitiva (cf. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Gibbs, 1993,1994; Kövecses & Szabó, 1999, 2001; Boers, 2011; Ruiz de Mendoza & Pérez-Hernández, 2011). En liñas xerais, unha explicación cognitiva sostén que o significado da maioría das expresións idiomáticas é motivado por unha serie de mecanismos conceptuais subxacentes como por exemplo a metáfora e a metonimia. O obxectivo desta tese é o de explorar as expresións idiomáticas dende unha perspectiva metafórica e así demostrar como son adquiridas tanto por falantes nativos do inglés como por falantes de inglés como lingua estranxeira; ao mesmo tempo subliñarase a importancia da competencia metafórica no proceso de ensinanza e aprendizaxe. Particularmente se prestará atención ás expresións metafóricas, comparando as perspectivas semánticas tradicionais e cognitivas, e tratando á súa vez temas como o desenvolvemento da interpretación da metáfora e as habilidades para a súa produción por falantes nativos do inglés; a relación entre a interpretación da metáfora e a súa produción por falantes nativos e estudantes do inglés como lingua estranxeira; a contribución da competencia metafórica ó aprendizaxe e interpretación das expresións idiomáticas, ase como os problemas que isto implica na súa transferencia entre ámbalas dúas variedades da lingua inglesa, é dicir, a nativa e a utilizado por estudantes de inglés en lingua estranxeira. Por último, este estudo intenta arrojar certa luz sobre o proceso activo do pensamento metafórico que ten lugar na lingua do falante

nativo para facilitar tanto o aprendizaxe como o uso das expresións idiomáticas baseadas en metáforas nos falantes de inglés como lingua estranxeira.

**Palabras clave:** metáfora, expresiones idiomáticas, Lingüística Cognitiva, Semántica Cognitiva, metáfora conceptual, Teoría de la Metáfora Conceptual, competencia metafórica, dominio de la fuente, dominio del concepto, fluidez conceptual, lenguaje figurativo.



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I revere the moral support extended with love by my family, whose passionate encouragement and patience made it possible for me to complete this project.

Through this research paper I have learnt a lot about the cognitive approach to metaphor and the empirical study served as a source of inspiration for further research in the form of my MA thesis.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AmE	American English
BrE	British English
CF	Conceptual Fluency
CL	Cognitive Linguistics
CMT	Conceptual Metaphor Theory
EFL	English as Foreign Language
FL	Foreign Language
ICLE	<i>International Corpus of Learner English</i>
L1	English as Mother Tongue
L2	English as Foreign Language
LINDSEI	<i>Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage</i>
LOCNEC	<i>Louvain Corpus of Native English Conversation</i>
LOCNESS	<i>Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays</i>
MC	Metaphoric Competence
NNS	Non-native Speaker
NS	Native Speaker
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
PG	Pedagogical Grammar
SLA	Second Language Acquisition

## LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1: Semantic classification of idioms.....	16
Table 2: Features of all four corpora used in the study.....	41
Table 3: Frequency of fire/heat and fire/heat-motivated words in all four corpora.....	47
Table 4: Literal and figurative use of fire/heat and fire/heat-motivated words in all four corpora.....	49
Table 5: Classification of metaphoric expression (one-word expressions and idioms) in all four corpora.....	50
Table 6: Metaphorical idioms derived from EMOTION IS HEAT (OF FIRE) .....	53
Table 7. Classification of metaphoric idioms in NSs' corpora.....	54
Figure 1: Conception of idioms in the traditional view (Kövecses and Szabó 1996: 328).....	19
Figure 2: Fire-entry in Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms (1998).....	20
Figure 3: Conceptual motivation of spit fire (Kövecses and Szabó, 1996: 332).....	23
Figure 4: Classification of idioms in Lontos' Idiom Diffusion Model of Second Language.....	30
Figure 5: Comparison of idioms in two languages: degree of similarity (Laufer, 2000: 189).....	34
Figure 6: Figure. Fire/heat-“idiomprone” words in Oxford (2004), Kövecses' examples (2002), Collins Cobuild (1995), Cambridge (1994), The American Heritage dictionary of idioms (1997) and Farlex Dictionary (online).....	42

## **0. Introduction**

Despite considerable research on idioms, idiom learning is still a challenging area to many L2 learners. This work is an exploration of idioms from a metaphoric perspective to examine their acquisition and processing by speakers of two varieties of English, L1 (English as mother tongue) and L2 (English as a FL spoken by Spanish speakers). The reason behind the decision to investigate idioms in English lies in my interest in the understanding and acquisition of speech by native (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs), which in the case of English is full of figurative expressions. As a FL student, I have always been interested in understanding why L2 learners' discourse is often so unnatural. Current research on metaphor has demonstrated that it constitutes a fundamental aspect of discourse programming as it demonstrates the fact that an average NS produces about 3,000 metaphors a week (Danesi, 1995). For this reason, I focused my research on the study of the acquisition of metaphoric competence by L2 learners, or, the "neglected dimension", as Danesi describes it (1992: 1). More specifically, the study scrutinises the frequency of metaphoric idioms within the source domain of fire in two variants of English (L1 and L2) through a corpus research analysis with a view to drawing some tentative implications for SLA teaching and methodology.

The work is organised in six chapters. Chapter 1 provides the theoretical foundations for the corpus based analysis. First, the nature of idioms is explained and a number of possible classifications of idioms are presented, taking into account the findings of prior investigations. After this, an overview is offered of the traditional and cognitive views on idioms, which constitutes the basis of approaches such as the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), alluded to in this study. Chapter 2 explores the understanding and processing of idioms in L1 and L2. In the former case, mention is made of different dimensions involved in the acquisition of idioms by NSs; whereas

section 2.2 presents a theoretical review of different theories that have been identified in the acquisition of idioms by L2 learners, the question of avoidance, as well as their pedagogical implications. Chapter 3 is devoted to an empirical analysis of the frequency in the use of a selection of metaphorical idioms on fire in the two variants, L1 (NS) and L2 (NNS). First, the research questions are presented, in addition to the methodology endorsed to answer them involving the analysis of a comprehensive list of metaphorical idioms with fire as the source domain in two empirical studies (study 1 and study 2). Details are also offered as to the choice criteria for idiom selection as well as regards the dictionaries from which idioms were retrieved. This is followed by a discussion of the results. Chapter 4 presents a summary of conclusions contrasting the use of metaphorical idioms in English across L1 and L2 variants. The dissertation closes with a summary of the main conclusions and some suggestions for further research.

Finally, it should be mentioned that, while writing this BA thesis under the supervision of Prof. Gómez González I have greatly benefited from the knowledge gained throughout the degree in English Language and Literature at the USC (University of Santiago de Compostela), especially in the subjects of English Morphosyntax, English Syntax and Semantics and English Grammar and Discourse.

## **1. The nature of idioms**

### **1.1. Definition and classifications of idioms**

In order to understand why idioms are generally considered to be one of the most difficult areas of learning English as a foreign language (EFL), it is necessary to understand what these idiomatic expressions consist of, as well as their nature and the properties that enable us to classify them. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, an idiom in its specific sense is “a group of words established by usage as having a

meaning not deducible from the meanings of the individual words” (OED Online. Oxford University Press, Retrieved on May, 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019). Based on this definition, many researchers have concluded that idioms can be considered arbitrary and unpredictable fixed or semi-fixed expressions of language, whose learning and comprehension pose a challenge L2 learners and even to NSs, and whose acquisition and processing do not usually occur until learners reach a proficiency level in the FL. However, as we shall see, an increasing number of researchers have found a “great deal of systematic conceptual motivation for the meaning of most idioms” (Kövecses and Szabó, 1996: 326).

Regarding their classification, as can be seen in Table 1, several attempts have been made to categorize them. Kövecses describe idioms as “mixed bag since several types of linguistic expressions can be subscribed to the category of idioms, i.e. metaphors (e.g. *spills the beans*), metonymies (e.g. *throw up one’s hands*), pairs of words (e.g. *cats and dogs*), idioms with *it* (e.g. *live it up*), similes (e.g. *as easy as pie*), sayings (e.g. *a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*), phrasal verbs (e.g. *come up*), grammatical idioms (e.g. *let alone*), etc. (Kövecses 2002: 199). In fact, it is their heterogeneous nature that makes it difficult to provide categorical, single-criterion definitions of idioms. Nevertheless, Nunberg *et al.* (1994: 492-3) propose a series of properties of “*prototypical idioms*” such as *eat your heart out* which include:

- (i) **conventionality** (i.e. they have unpredictable meanings, not deducible from the analysis of its parts, e.g. *kick the bucket*)
- (ii) **inflexibility** (i.e. idioms typically have restricted syntax, e.g. *shoot the breeze* (to chat) and cannot appear in passive form \*the breeze was shot)

- (iii) **figuration** (i.e. they typically involve metaphors (e.g. *take the bull by the horns*), metonymies (e.g. *lend a hand*), hyperboles (e.g. *not worth the paper it's printed on*), or other kinds of figuration)
- (iv) **proverbiality** (i.e. they are typically used to describe recurrent situation of social interest to inform (e.g. reveal a secret) about things or situations with which they have certain resemblance (e.g. *spilling beans*)
- (v) **informality** (i.e. they are typically associated with informal register and oral culture, e.g. *as easy as pie*)
- (vi) **affect** (i.e. they are typically used to imply a certain evaluation toward the things they describe, e.g. *shoot the breeze*).

However, as Nunberg *et al.* (1994: 493) state, there is a lack of homogeneity among idioms since, apart from conventionality, none of these properties apply to all of them. For instance, there are idioms such as *by dint of* that have no figurative interpretation. Others like *second thoughts*, have no literal meaning denoting concrete things or relation, while cases like *render unto Caesar* have no register restriction.

Considering their nature and properties, this dissertation will contrast the traditional view of the semantics of idioms and the more innovative view developed by cognitive semantics. Consequently, when looking at different classifications of idioms (see Table 1), their semantic properties will be highlighted. An illustration of the traditional semantic approach is proposed by Nunberg *et al.* (1994: 498):

- (i) their **compositionality** (i.e. the degree to which the phrasal meaning can be analysed in terms of the contributions of the idioms parts, e.g. in *pull the strings* strings refer metaphorically to ‘personal connections’ and pull refers to ‘exploit’)

- (ii) their **conventionality** (i.e. degree to which idiomatic meanings are not predictable based upon knowledge of the word components in isolation, e.g. *kick the bucket* means ‘to die’)
- (iii) their **transparency** (i.e. degree to which the original motivation of these phrases is immediately accessible, e.g. *saw logs* means ‘sleep’ based on the resemblance of the two sounds caused by both activities).

Nunberg <i>et al.</i> (1994)	Fillmore <i>et al.</i> (1990)	Cacciari & Glucksbert (1991)	Cacciari & Glucksbert (1991)
compositionality	compositionality	compositionality	transparency
Idiomatically combining expressions (compositional) <i>answer the door</i>	Encoding idioms (compositional) <i>answer the door</i>	Non-compositional idioms <i>cheesecake</i>	Compositional –opaque idioms <i>kick the bucket</i>
Idiomatic phrases (non-compositional) <i>spill the beans</i>	Decoding idioms (non-compositional) <i>pull a fast one</i>	Partly-compositional idioms <i>kick the bucket</i>	Compositional- transparent idioms <i>break the ice</i>
		Fully- compositional idioms <i>pop the question</i>	Quasi-metaphorical idioms <i>crossing one’s bridges before coming to them</i>

Table 1. Semantic classification of idioms.

In addition, Nunberg’s (1978) semantic analysis of idioms (1978), which has been very influential in the field of idiom acquisition by NNSs of English, distinguishes between non-compositional approach and compositional approaches. **Non-compositional** approaches consider idioms as lexical entries, associating their nonliteral meanings with somewhat arbitrary configurations of words. In contrast, **compositional approaches** focus on their non-arbitrary internal semantic and syntactic structure of



idioms. Such distinction led the authors to distinguish between (Nunberg *et al.*, 1994: 496-7):

- (i) **idiomatically combining expression** (i.e. idioms where parts of the idiomatic meaning can be put in correspondence with parts of the literal meaning, e.g. *answer the door*, where *answer* corresponds to ‘opening’ and *the door* denotes ‘the door’)
- (ii) **idiomatic phrases** (i.e. idioms where no such correspondences can be established, e.g. *spill the beans* ‘to reveal a secret’)

A similar description and classification was expanded by Fillmore *et al.* (1988: 231-232), who used the analysis of idioms for a construction grammar. The authors distinguish between: encoding idioms and decoding idioms.

- (i) **Encoding idioms**, i.e., idioms that are interpretable by the standard rules for interpreting sentences, but are arbitrary, that is, conventional for the specific expression with an specific meaning (e.g. *answer the door* for ‘open the door in response to someone knocking’).
- (ii) **Decoding idioms**, i.e., the meaning of an idiom as a whole cannot be figured out by the hearer from the meaning of its parts (e.g. *pull a fast one* ‘to trick someone’).

Other scholars that have attempted to classify idioms according to their degree of compositionality, include Cacciari & Glucksberg (1991, cit. in Kovács, 2016: 89). They distinguish **non-compositional idioms**, that is, those in which there is no relation between idiom’s constituents and idiom’s meaning such as *cheesecake* to refer to pinup art, from **partially compositional** and **fully compositional idioms**. In partially compositional idioms there are some relationships between the idiom’s constituents and

its idiomatic meaning (e.g. *kick the bucket*), whereas in fully compositional idioms, constituents map directly onto their idiomatic referents (e.g. *pop the question*). Another classification of idioms proposed by Cacciari & Glucksberg (1991, cit. in Kovács, 216: 89) is based on their degree of transparency, which involves the extent to which the meaning of the idioms can be deduced from the meaning of its constituents. Accordingly, Cacciari & Glucksberg differentiate compositional opaque idioms from compositional transparent and quasi-metaphorical idioms.

- (i) In **compositional opaque idioms**, there is an opaque relation between an idiom's constituent and its meaning, constraining both interpretation and use (e.g. *kick the bucket*).
- (ii) In **compositional transparent idioms**, there is a transparent relation between the idiom's constituents and the idiom's meaning (e.g. in *break the ice*, *break* is understood in its metaphorical sense of 'changing an uncomfortable social situation in an abrupt manner' and *ice* as 'interpersonal tension').
- (iii) In **quasi-metaphorical idioms** the meaning is conveyed cognitively through their allusional content to stereotypes of certain situations, actions, or people (e.g. *crossing one's bridges before coming to them* refers to 'doing something prematurely').

As can be seen, the several attempts to classify idioms described so far, respond to the need to raise a certain awareness of the existence of different types of idioms to help NSs and NNSs in the process of processing, understanding and learning idioms, as will be further discussed in chapter two.

## 1.2. Traditional view vs Cognitive View of Idioms

There are two main approaches to describe the acquisition and processing of idioms by NSs and NNSs of English: the traditional view and the cognitive view. According to Kövecses (2002: 199), in the traditional view, idioms are regarded as “a special set of the larger category of words [...], treated as a matter of language alone [...], taken to be items of the lexicon [...] and independent of any conceptual systems”. Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of this “core conception” of idioms:

<b>special idiomatic meaning</b>	die
<b>the meaning of the linguistic forms</b>	kick the bucket
<b>linguistic forms and their syntactic properties</b>	kick the bucket (no passive, etc.)

Figure 1: Conception of idioms in the traditional view (Kövecses and Szabó 1996: 328)

Within the traditional view, the meaning of idioms cannot be guessed from the compositional analysis of their individual words. In other words, their figurative meaning is different from the meanings of the words that constitute them. These early non-compositional theories of idiom processing suggest there is a “direct access” to the meaning of the whole idiom, without analysing its elements (Glucksberg, 1993 cit. in Cieslicka, 2015: 210), allowing NSs to store idioms in their mental lexicon and process them during language comprehension. For this reason idioms were long seen as dead-frozen metaphors, a traditional view that has been re-examined and challenged over the past years (Lakoff, 1987; Gibb, 1980, 1997; Kövecses and Szabó, 1996). In addition to the arbitrariness and unpredictability of idioms, the traditional view suggests that idioms only have linguistic meaning relations similar to those of words (synonymy, antonymy, homonymy and polysemy) but they do not express relations in a conceptual system. For this reason, there is a disassociation between the linguistic meaning and the conceptual system in idioms, which are at the same time isolated from each other. As a result of

this division, peculiar forms of systematising idioms were created such as those of dictionary entries that are organised according to words like *fire* (e.g. *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms*, 1998), as shown in Figure 2. This arrangement that does not reflect the conceptual nature of idioms, but only a formal property, that is, whether the idiom contains the word *fire*.

<p><b>Fire</b></p> <p><b>fire in your/the belly</b></p> <p>if you have fire in your belly, you are ready to fight with energy and determination for what you believe is right • <i>He will approach the committee with plenty of fire in his belly.</i></p> <p><b>breathe fire</b></p> <p>to be very angry about something • (sometimes + over) <i>The bishop was breathing fire over the press release made a few years days ago.</i></p> <p><b>come under fire</b></p> <p>to be criticized • (often + from) Last night's announcement quickly came under fire from the trade unions .• (sometimes + for) <i>Mr Johnson has since come under fire for being sarcastic and dismissive of his clients.</i></p>
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Fig 2. Fire-entry in *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* (1998)

Taking the aforementioned moot points into account, scholars like Lakoff (1987), Gibb (1980, 1997) and Kövecses and Szabó (1996) challenged the semantic approach taken, claiming that it is the conceptual nature of the idiom rather than the words involved, that plays a key role in the creation and decoding of an idiomatic expression. This trend came to be known as *Cognitive Linguistics* approach to the study of idioms. Cognitive linguistics (CL), particularly cognitive semantics, has developed the basis of innovative theories about the relationship between language and thought. According to Kövecses (2002: 4) an important aspect of CL is the understanding of language in general, and idioms in particular, as metaphorical in nature. This cognitive view of metaphors was investigated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in their *Conceptual*

*Metaphor Theory* (CMT), which claims that the concepts that govern our thoughts structure our everyday life.

Before examining Lakoff and Johnson's findings, some widely used terms in CMT should be clarified. In CL, *metaphor* is perceived as understanding one conceptual domain (B) in terms of another conceptual domain (A). A *conceptual domain* is any coherent organisation of experience. For example, we often talk and think about emotions in terms of the fire and heat, as has been previously attested in a number of studies investigating these metaphorical expressions from a CL perspective (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Kövecses and Szabó, 1996; Kövecses, 2002; Kövecses, 2005). Thus, a conceptual metaphor such as EMOTION IS HEAT (OF FIRE) consists of a target domain such as *emotions*, which is understood in terms a source domain such as *fire/heat*. Both domains are based on a series of *conceptual correspondences or mappings* between the two domains (A is B). By examining various ways in which NSs employed metaphors in everyday conversations, Jackoff and Johnson uncovered a whole conceptual system, which plays a central role in defining our everyday reality. According to CMT, this conceptual system is "largely metaphorical", i.e. "what we think [...], experience [...] and do every day is much a matter of metaphor" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 5). Two can be considered the most important claims in their research. On the one hand, the conceptual system we use in thinking and acting is reflected in language. On the other hand "human thought processes are largely metaphorical" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 6). To illustrate how concepts are metaphorically present in language and structured in our conceptualisation of an everyday activity, they provided the example of the concept ARGUMENT and the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR. According to the authors, such metaphor is present in everyday expressions such as *Your claims are indefensible*, *His criticism was right to the target* and *I*

*demolished his argument.* Lakoff and Johnson concluded that it is in this rather unconscious conventional way of talking about ARGUMENT where the concept is metaphorically structured, the activity is metaphorically structured, and consequently, the language is metaphorically used. Thus, Lakoff and Johnson's work show that metaphors should not be considered exclusive of poetic and rhetorical language. Rather they play an important part not only of everyday language, but also in our conceptualisation of the world and the reality that surrounds us. As will be seen in section two, this deep process of conceptualisation affects the processing of idioms. In this line and along Lakoff and Johnson's work, Kövecses and Szabó (1996: 330) made an important generalisation about idioms:

[...] idioms are products of our conceptual system and not simply a matter of language (i.e. matter of the lexicon). An idiom is not just an expression that has meaning that is somehow special in relation to the meanings of its constituent parts, but it arises from our more general knowledge of the world (embodied in our conceptual system). In other words, idioms are [...] conceptual, and not linguistic in nature.

From this generalisation it can be concluded that, contrary to the beliefs of the traditional views, in cognitive semantics the meaning of an idiom relies on the speakers' general knowledge of the world which is in turn embodied in their conceptual system. Therefore such meaning can be seen as motivated rather than arbitrary. The concept of *conceptual motivation* refers to the fact that the meaning of most idioms seems natural to us because there are a number of cognitive mechanisms such as metaphor, metonymy and conventional knowledge that link domains of knowledge to idiomatic meanings (Kövecses and Szabó, 2002: 201). Similarly, Gibbs (1997: 142) states that idioms do not exist as separate semantic units within the lexicon, but as a coherent system of

metaphorical concepts. For instance, idiomatic expressions such as *blow your stack*, *get hot under the collar* and *flip your lid* seem motivated by the conceptual metaphor ANGER IS HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER, where the conceptual mapping of a source domain (heated fluid in a container) and a target domain (anger) has resulted from our conceptualisation of the abstract concept of anger. However, there are cases such as *kick the bucket* in which such conceptual motivation does not occur at all and the meaning of the idiom is based on cultural or conventional knowledge (Kövecses and Szabó, 1996: 331).

Finally, to illustrate the semantic motivation for the occurrence of particular words in idioms Kövecses and Szabó (1996: 333) suggest the expression *spit fire*. As shown in Figure 3, the words, *spit* and *fire* are conceptually motivating and simultaneously bridge the gap between two otherwise independently existing conceptual domains (*anger* and *fire*). This example shows that the connection these words make in our conceptual system develop into conceptual metaphors that allow us to use terms from one domain (e.g. *fire*) to talk about another (e.g. *anger*, *love*, *conflict*, etc.).

<b>Special idiomatic meaning</b>	‘be very angry’
<b>Cognitive mechanism</b>	Metaphor: ANGER IS FIRE
<b>Conceptual domain (s)</b>	FIRE (source domain), ANGER (target domain)
<b>Linguistic forms</b>	spit fire
<b>Meaning of forms</b>	‘spit’ ‘fire’

Figure 3. Conceptual motivation of *spit fire* (Kövecses and Szabó, 1996: 332).

## 2. IDIOM PROCESSING

### 2.1. IDIOM IN L1

As already seen, the meaning of many idioms depends on the (metaphorical) conceptual system of the speakers that use them. In other words, the process of metaphorical

conceptualisation affects the processing of idioms in L1. But before introducing the relationship between metaphor and idiom processing skills and their transfer from L1 to L2, it is essential to focus on a review of theoretical accounts of the acquisition and processing of idioms by NSs. The way NSs store idioms in their mental lexicon has been approached from number of perspectives. The main two approaches in L1 idioms' processing roughly coincide with those already described in the previous chapter to classify idioms: *compositional* and *non-compositional*. Hence, non-compositional theories consider idiom meaning arbitrary. NSs understand idioms by directly retrieving them as a whole from a special idiom lexicon where they are stored, rather than by processing its components literally. This is suggested in such theories as Idiom List Hypothesis, Lexical Representation Hypothesis and Direct Access Model<sup>1</sup>. In contrast, compositional theories emerged to tackle some of the problems arising from non-compositional models such as the inability to explain the internal changes idioms experience without altering their meaning, e. g. *spill the beans*, "He didn't spill a single bean". According to theories such as Idiom Decomposition Model, Configuration Model and Phrase- induced Polysemy Model<sup>2</sup>, the idiomatic meaning is derived from literal analysis of the components and their figurative interpretation within a given

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<sup>1</sup> **Idiom List Hypothesis:** Bobrow and Bell (1973) suggest that fixed expressions are stored as a separate list of long complex words, which are accessed as single lexical items.

**Lexical Representation Hypothesis:** Swinney and Cutler (1979) suggest that idiomatic expressions are stored and mentally processed as long ambiguous single words, whose all potential meanings are accessed when such a 'long word' is encountered.

**Direct Access Model:** Gibbs (1980) proposes that idioms are lexical items whose idiomatic meaning is retrieved directly from the mental lexicon as soon as they are encountered in an utterance and only if the meaning is inappropriate to the context it is then interpreted literally.

<sup>2</sup> **Idiom Decomposition Model:** Gibbs et al. (1989) suggest that individual words in an idiomatic expression seem to contribute to the overall figurative meaning of the idiom due to their metaphoric potential.

**Configuration Model:** Cacciari & Tabossi (1988; 1991) suggest that idioms are grouped together with other memorised strings in the lexicon.. Literal and figurative (idiomatic) processing run in parallel until the literal sense is definitely rejected and the idiomatic one is accepted as the intended interpretation.

**Phrase-Induced Polysemy Model:** Glucksberg (1993) assumes polysemous character of words in the string.



context (Cieslicka, 2015: 210). Other approaches like the Hybrid Model and the Constrained – Based Model<sup>3</sup> postulate that idioms behave both compositionally and non-compositionally. For instance, speakers can easily guess the idiomatic meaning of common idioms such *play with fire* (‘to do dangerous things’) both automatically and from its literal analysis (*playing with fire* is literally ‘something dangerous’). Whether NSs approach an idiomatic expression literally or idiomatically is explained by hypothesis such as the Graded Salience Hypothesis<sup>4</sup> (Giora, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2003, cit. in Cieslicka, 2015: 212).

From the above mentioned theories, the following factors can be adduced to explain idiom processing by NSs (Cieslicka, 2015: 212):

- (i) the **presence** (e.g. *skate on thin ice*) or **absence** (e.g. *go bananas*) of **plausible literal meaning** of idioms;
- (ii) the **high predictability of the figurative meaning** of some idioms, allowing NSs to quickly recognise them (e.g. *turn a blind eye*);
- (iii) the **low predictability of their figurative meaning**, making them not easily recognisable even by NS (e.g. *pass the buck*);
- (iv) the **familiarity and salience of idioms**, distinguishing some highly familiar and frequently used idioms in L1 (e.g. *keep an eye on someone*), whose figurative meaning is salient for NSs, from other less familiar idioms (e.g. *the goose hangs high*), making their literal meaning to be the first to come to mind to L1 speakers.

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<sup>3</sup>**Hybrid Model and Constrained-Based Models** suggest that idioms are non-compositional because they are highly automatized multiword expressions whose meaning can be accessed directly from the speaker’s mental lexicon.

<sup>4</sup>**Graded Salience Hypothesis** (Giora, 1997, 1999 cit. in Cieslicka, 2015). This hypothesis claims that the salient meaning of a conventionalised and frequent idiomatic expression is first accessed and retrieved from the mental lexicon by NSs than its literal meaning.

- (v) the **semantic analysability of idioms**, which explains how the meanings of the individual components contribute to the idiom's overall figurative interpretation. This explains *semantically decomposable* idioms such as *spill the beans*, where *spill* relates to “divulge something” while *beans* to secrets and *non-decomposable idioms* such as *kick the bucket*, whose individual components cannot be mapped to their figurative meaning.
- (vi) the **semantic transparency of idioms**, which explains how the original metaphorical motivation of the idiom can be deduced from its literal analysis. For example, in *saw logs*, NSs find a similarity between the sound produced by a snoring person and the one resulting from sawing wood.

So far we have seen how factors affecting the acquisition and processing of idioms lead to the natural development of competence in figurative language in L1. Considering that the knowledge of idiomatic expressions constitutes a crucial component of figurative competence, together with the fact that idioms are conceptually motivated, the relationship between metaphor and idiom processing skills seems self-evident. Let us now turn to summarise the main factors involved in the relationship. Firstly, as noted by Kövecses and Szabó (2002: 206), metaphorical conceptualisations such as idioms are an intrinsic feature of NSs' discourse. Secondly, for this reason, NSs are conceptually fluent, i.e. they know how language reflects its concepts based on a metaphorical structure. And thirdly, NSs have a metaphorical competence, i.e. competence by which they are able to programme their discourse in metaphorical ways (Danesi 1993, cit. in Kövecses and Szabo, 2002: 206).

The metaphoric competence (MC) in L1 idiom processing is described by Littlemore and Low (2006:4) as the knowledge of and the ability to use metaphors as well as the cognitive skills needed to work effectively with them. According to these

authors, this skill starts to develop during a concrete period (4 to 11 year olds) and continues with age. They also point out to four components in MC:

- (i) **originality of metaphor production**, that is, the ability to invent one's own unconventional metaphors
- (ii) **fluency of metaphor interpretations**, i.e. ability to find more than one possible meaning for a metaphor
- (iii) **ability to find meaning in metaphor**, i.e. ability to think a true meaning for a novel metaphor
- (iv) **speed in finding meaning**, i.e. ability to identify objective meaning rapidly during a conversation .

To round off this section, it can be concluded that a successful comprehension of metaphors, and by extension of idioms, can only occur if the listener identifies some kind of relationship between the source and the target domain, whose interpretation is largely determined by the context in which it occurs, as also remarked by Littlemore and Low (2006). Although this seems a relatively easy process as the context and shared knowledge are usually sufficient to guess the intention of their interlocutors, an important difference usually emerges when contrasting idiom and metaphor comprehension by NSs and NNSs. While the former use figurative language unconsciously and effortlessly, the latter struggle to achieve a full mastery of metaphor comprehension in the FL (Littlemore and Low, 2006: 46).

## **2.2. IDIOM IN L2**

For a successful understanding of the relationship between metaphor and idiom processing in L1 and their transfer to L2, this chapter offers a theoretical review of

different theories that investigated the acquisition of idioms by L2 learners, the question of avoidance, as well as their pedagogical implications.

### 2.2.1. L2 idiom acquisition

When comparing the MC in both first and FL, Littlemore (2010: 292) found that this cognitive process of understanding and producing metaphors occurs first in one's mother tongue and it is then transferred to the FL. The acquisition of idioms in a FL has been described as the development of an L2 lexical repertoire, a process in which one's native language plays an important role (Cieslicka, 2015: 214). Research shows that while acquiring idioms in L2, the already established conceptual and lexical systems in one's first language are used by L2 learners. This is known as the *Parasitic Hypothesis* of vocabulary development<sup>5</sup>. In fact, NNSs tend to resort to the literal translation of the idiom's components and search for its first language equivalent. For instance, in the idiom *play with fire*, L2 learners may initially decide to borrow their first language-based conceptual representation, considering Spanish has a similar idiom *jugar con fuego*. As can be seen, the Parasitic Hypothesis proves to be particularly useful for less advanced L2 learners, who first translate the English idiom into their first language to make sense of it before trying to guess its figurative meaning. Nevertheless, the parasitic view is not free of controversy. Although some studies adopt it to account for the acquisition of idioms in L2 (Matlock and Heredia, 2002, cit. in Cieslicka, 2015: 215), other researchers hypothesise that advanced L2 learners may follow Gibb's *Direct Access Model*, that is, they directly retrieve the figurative meaning of FL idioms. In addition, this parasitic view of idiom acquisition seems to work well with idioms that

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<sup>5</sup>**Parasitic Hypothesis.** Hall (2002 cit. in Cieslicka, 2015: 214) suggests that newly acquired L2 words have no separate meaning representations, but instead learners rely on the conceptual structures of their native language to build a parasitic lexicon. Then, as learners establish L2 conceptual direct connections between L2 linguistic forms and their corresponding L2 concepts, the parasitic lexicon is gradually replaced.

are similar, identical and transparent across languages; however, opaque and difficult idioms with a lack word-for-word equivalent in the learner's mother tongue still pose challenging. In such cases it has been claimed that L2 learners generally use the following strategy: first, a literally based analysis is applied in order to determine the figurative interpretation of idioms, and after this they resort to the context of occurrence (Cieslicka, 2015: 215).

The parasitic view also suggests that the degree of **idiom translatability and cross-language similarity** play an important role in L2 idiom acquisition. Several experiments with L2 learners (Irujo, 1986; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993, cit. in Cieslicka, 2015: 216) have shown that idioms transparency is an assisting influence in L2 idiom comprehension and production. Thus, transparent idioms that use simple vocabulary and structure such as *bury the hatchet* or idioms with identical or similar form and meaning across languages such as *play with fire* seem easier to understand than opaque or different idioms such as *chew the fat*. A concomitant result was reported by Irujo's (1986) experiment *Don't Put Your Leg in Your Mouth: Transfer in the Acquisition of Idioms in a Second Language*, where she showed that while comprehension of identical idioms or similar in form and meaning to their Spanish equivalents were easier for L2 learners, in the production tasks similar idioms proved to be more liable to inference from their mother tongue. Irujo (1986) prefers to talk about positive and negative transfer when L2 learners use their knowledge of their mother tongue to help them understand and produce idioms in L2. In her experiment the author concluded that L2 learners, especially advanced learners with a mother tongue related to L2, generally used their knowledge of idioms in their native language to comprehend and produce idioms in L2. Irujo also identified a number of difficulties that Spanish learners of English face. This occurs when they confuse parts of an idiom they have heard but not

mastered. For instance, \*to go out on a stick instead is used for *to go out on a limb* (‘to take a risk’) and \*to spread the voice seems a calque of the Spanish expression *corer la voz*, instead of using *to spread the news*.

Other L2 idiom processing theories such as *Idiom Diffusion Model of Second Language* <sup>6</sup> takes into account the interaction between the cross-language similarity and the supportive context. As can be seen in Figure 4, according to the model, there are three different idioms:

- (i) **lexical level idioms:** idioms with identical first language equivalent are the easiest to understand, one-to-one match between the FL and the native language, e.g. *take the bull by the horns* (tomar el toro por los cuernos)
- (ii) **semi-lexical level idioms:** idioms with slightly different first language equivalent, where the meaning of one or more lexical items has to be inferred as they are not present in the speaker’s first language idioms, e.g. *pull someone’s leg* (tomarle el pelo a alguien)
- (iii) **post-lexical level idioms:** idioms that have no equivalent in the learner’s first language, so that learners rely heavily on contextual clues, e.g. *to save someone’s neck* (sacar a alguien las castañas del fuego).

Idiom type	L1 idioms	Spanish equivalent
<b>Lexical level idioms</b>	<i>take the bull by the horns</i>	tomar el toro por los cuernos
<b>Semi-lexical level idioms</b>	<i>pull someone’s leg</i>	tomarle el pelo a alguien
<b>Post-lexical level idioms</b>	<i>to save someone’s neck</i>	sacar a alguien las castañas del fuego

Figure 4. Classification of idioms in Liontas’ *Idiom Diffusion Model of Second Language*

<sup>6</sup> *Idiom Diffusion Model of Second Language*. Liontas (2002, cit. in Cieslicka, 2015: 219) proposes two stages in L2 idiom comprehension: *prediction* (L2 learners construct a number of predictions about idiom’s figurative meaning based on the degree of idiom transparency, semantic distance between L2 idiom and its native language counterpart and the presence of a supporting context) and *reconstruction* (L2 learners verify such predictions by analysing the information available, focusing on the contextual support and rejecting unlikely interpretations).

Another model of L2 idiom acquisition is the *Model of Dual Idiom Representation*<sup>7</sup> (Abel, 2003, cit. in Cieslicka, 2015: 219), which focuses on the role of *idiom decomposability* and *familiarity* in the L2 learner's mental lexicon. Frequency and familiarity would then explain the difference in MC between NSs and NNSs. While NSs develop idiom entries in their mental lexicon due to their constant exposure and use of idioms, NNSs have to rely on the literal analysis of the idioms' constituents to guess their idiomatic meaning and consequently develop less lexical or idiom entries in their mental lexicon.

To close the revision of models of metaphoric idiom acquisition, let us refer to Cieslicka's (2015: 221) *Literal Salience Model*<sup>8</sup>. According to this model, the non-salient meaning of the idiom can gradually change with time and repeated exposure and acquire a salient status in the learner's mental lexicon. As a result, the idiom's figurative meaning becomes more salient and likely to be activated faster than the literal meaning. Nevertheless, this process seems unlikely to occur with NNSs due to their lack of natural and constant exposure to the FL, which delays the L2 idiom being established in their mental lexicon. On the contrary, NSs process idioms faster as frequency and familiarity of idioms help to lexicalise them and quickly retrieve them from their mental lexicon.

Regardless of the approach, all the models revised so far observe a number of factors intervening in L2 idiom processing, some of which were also present in the equivalent process in L1.

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<sup>7</sup> **Model of Dual Idiom Representation.** Abel (2003, cit. in Cieslicka, 2015: 219) focuses on the role of idiom decomposability and familiarity in the L2 learner's mental lexicon. Whereas non-decomposable idioms such as *kick the bucket* have its own idiom entry, decomposable idioms such as *spill the beans* do not. Once an idiom is frequently used by L2 learners, it will develop its own idiom entry in their mental lexicon.

<sup>8</sup> **Literal Salience Model.** Cieslicka (2015: 221) states that because L2 learners know the literal meanings of words before their figurative sense, the literal meanings of the idioms parts are more salient than the whole idiom's figurative meaning and consequently more deeply coded in the learner's lexicon.

- (i) **idiom's literal plausibility or literality:** the extent to which the idiom can be interpreted literally. Several studies (Mueller & Gibbs, 1987; Titone & Connie, 1994, cit. in Cieslicka 2015: 226) suggest that literality affect the speed of idioms processing and the degree to which the literal meaning of idioms' constituents is activated.
- (ii) **idiom's semantic decomposability:** particularly relevant for NNSs considering their tendency to analyse idioms into constituent parts. Some models such as Gibb's *Idiom Decompositional Model* (Gibbs *et al.* 1989, cit. in Cieslicka 2015:227) proved that *non-decomposable idioms* took longer to be processed due to the inevitable process of assigning independent meaning to the idiom's components and the consequent mismatch between constituents' literal meaning and the figurative meaning of the idiom, while *decomposable idioms*, where the literal meaning of their parts match their figurative senses, were processed faster. However, other studies (Cieslicka 2010; 2013) proved that decomposability by itself does not affect idioms processing and both decomposable and non-decomposable idioms are stored and processed in a similar manner.
- (iii) **cross-language similarity:** it refers to the extent to which idioms have a direct translation and express the same meaning across languages, as in the case of *look for a needle in a haystack* and the Spanish equivalent expression *buscar una aguja en un pajar*. Although the cross-language translation strategy proves overall to be facilitative in idiom comprehension, experiments with online idiom processing (Cieslicka & Heredia, 2013, cit. in Cieslicka, 2015: 229) showed that similar idioms actually take longer to be processed because they recall for a word-for-word translation that activates a



first language equivalent, which needs to be later suppressed, resulting in idiom processing delayed. By contrast, idioms with no direct L1 counterpart do not trigger the activation of L1 lexical items, and so there is no need of suppression, shortening the processing time.

### 2.2.2. The question of avoidance

This section discusses one of its most important manifestations of cross linguistic influence in the acquisition of L2 idioms, the *question of avoidance*. Laufer (2000: 186) defines avoidance as “strategy learners may resort to in order to overcome a communicative difficulty” while producing a piece of discourse (written or oral) using one form instead of another with which they feel safer. In his experiment, Laufer (2000) shows three important findings. First, idioms are not avoided as a category. Second, L2 proficiency constitutes a factor in idiom avoidance. And third, the avoidance of specific idiom types is related to first and FL degrees of similarity. Laufer (2000: 189) also established four degrees of idiom similarity between languages, which seem to be at the core of avoidance and generate four different types of idioms as shown in Figure 5:

- (i) **total formal similarity category:** includes English idioms with an exact translation equivalent in learners’ first language, e.g. *lay the cards on the table* (‘poner las cartas sobre la mesa’)
- (ii) **partial formal similarity category:** includes English idioms which have partial translation equivalent, e.g. *miss the boat* (‘perder el tren’)
- (iii) **lack of formal similarity category:** includes different idioms in the two languages which express the same meaning, e.g. *to fool someone* has a similar expression in English *to take someone for a ride* (‘tomar por tonto, tomar el pelo’)

(iv) **distributional difference category:** include idioms in English with no counterpart in the learner's native language, e.g. *it's not my cup of tea*. Such degree of similarity can be represented as follows:

Idiom type	Distribution (idiomaticity)	Form (closeness of translation)
Type 1	+	+ exact translation e.g. <i>crocodile tears</i> ('lágrimas de cocodrilo')
Type 2	+	+/- partial translation e.g. e.g. <i>miss the boat</i> ('perder el tren')
Type 3	+	-different idiom in L1 e.g. <i>make ends meet</i> ('llegar fin de mes')
Type 4	-	- no idiom in L1 e.g. <i>let grass grow under your feet</i>

Figure 5. Comparison of idioms in two languages: (Laufer, 2000: 189).

Laufer's experiment suggests that the category of idioms is familiar to all language learners from their own mother tongue. It also shows that the avoidance of idioms is not a uniform phenomenon as some types of idioms were avoided, while others were not. For instance, Laufer's experiment shows that in type 2 idioms (i.e. those that are partially translatable), although the metaphor is similar in L1 and FL, the entire phrase is slightly different, e.g. *miss the boat* in Hebrew is 'miss the train'. As a result of this, avoidance takes place due to the potential confusion stemmed from their partial formal similarity. A similar situation occurs with type 4 idioms (i.e. those that involve non-idiomatic expressions in the first language such as *a piece of cake*). They are usually avoided as they do not have idiomatic counterparts in Hebrew and only be interpreted figuratively.

### 2.2.3. Pedagogical implications

All the above mentioned theories in idiom acquisition within the field of CL are related to a number of proposals of idiom teaching in recent years. With regard to the necessary cross-linguistic L1-L2 analysis for L2 teaching, we should consider the work of two important scholars, Ruiz de Mendoza and Agustin Lach (2016), who proposed a

teaching approach based on the contrastive grammatical analysis of L1 and L2, as the best way to identify potential areas of difficulties for L2 such as idiomatic expressions. Their *Pedagogical Grammar* (PG) approach recognises that in L2 acquisition, learners already master a conceptual system in their mother tongue. Therefore, PG suggests L2 pedagogical strategies based on raising students' awareness of their native language and L2 differences in "usage-based for meaning patterns" (Ruiz de Mendoza and Agustin Lach, 2016: 153). In their attempt to create a model of *Cognitive Pedagogical Grammar* that turns into a teaching proposal for figurative language, the authors start by understanding figurative language in terms of a "cognitive modelling". For example, in the case of a metaphor such as *He's been dogging me all day*, speakers make use of the frame knowledge about dog's behaviour (*source metaphor*) to refer to a person's persistent way of fowling another person (*target domain*). Some major contrastive tendencies between English and Spanish led the authors to make generalisations on the nature of figurative language. However, they observe that although Spanish and English metaphors seem to follow the same kind of cognitive activity, sometimes there are differences. This is the case of the conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS. Although it exists in both languages, some difficulties are found when setting up cross-linguistic equivalences. For instance, *My neighbour is a pig* and *She is catty* ('malicious') differ in that while the first example allows a literal translation into Spanish preserving the meaning (*Mi vecino es un cerdo*), the second example does not, as a literal translation into Spanish (*Ella es una gata*) would change the meaning of the idiomatic expression. According to Ruiz de Mendoza and Agustin Lach several pedagogical implications for the teaching of English idioms to L2 learners can be drawn from the previous cross-linguistic generalisations. Bearing in mind the need to train L2

advanced learners into the understanding of this cognitive phenomena and work towards their autonomy, they propose a number of principled steps (2016: 75):

- (i) **A Contrastive analysis** that invites learners to look into the L2 constructions and find its equivalent in their first language. For instance, *They laughed Mary out of the room* ('to force someone to leave a place by laughing in ridicule') has no direct equivalent in Spanish, although it can be translated as *Sacaron a Maria de la habitación a carcajadas*.
- (ii) **An explicit explanation about constructions (forms and meanings)** that underlie their cognitive structure need to be provided to learners. This will help them to derive their usage restrictions and use them in other similar contexts. For instance, in *They laughed Mary out of the room*, the verb *to laugh* expresses not only that the subject is forced to do something, but also the way in which the subject is made to perform the action and the result.
- (iii) **An exemplification and guided reflection** is provided to students by receiving further examples illustrating the idiomatic constructions. For instance, *He worked himself into a higher position in the company* or *He kicked the horse into a gallop*, are similar idiomatic constructions expressing result, helping learners in their process of abstraction and generalisation by providing input.
- (iv) **Practice to automatise the knowledge obtained** after being exposed to the idiomatic expressions and explicit explanations, by using a mixture of isolated practice and contextualised exercises.
- (v) **Self-assessment exercise** to reflect on one's own learning process in the acquisition of L2 idioms. For instance, Can I understand and use in communicative situations the expression I have learned?

Although previously neglected, the topic of metaphoric and figurative language has gained prominence in the field of L2 teaching (Danesi, 1998, 2005; Littlemore and Low, 2006). The reason probably is that the ability to understand and use metaphors (metaphoric competence) is likely to improve the level of proficiency and naturalness in the FL. An interesting aspect in L2 learner's discourse is the lack of conceptual richness, when compared to NSs' discourse, known to use approximately 3,000 metaphors per week. Whereas verbal fluency (grammatical and communicative proficiency) seems an easy goal to achieve, L2 learners' discourses lack conceptual fluency. Danesi (1995: 5) claims that to be "conceptually fluent" students need to know how L2 language encodes its concepts metaphorically, a kind of knowledge that is largely unconscious in NSs. For instance, if a NS of English was to speak about "ideas", his/her mind would unconsciously think of A is B conceptual domains such as IDEAS ARE GEOMETRICAL OBJECTS (*I don't get the point of your idea*), IDEAS AS PLANTS (*Your ideas are coming to fruition*) or IDEAS ARE BUILDINGS (*Your ideas are grounded on a solid foundation*). After several pilot studies Danesi (1995) concluded that MC does not exist in the L2 learner's discourse due to the fact that L2 classrooms offer no access to the conceptual system of the TL. It is because of the student's inability to achieve conceptual fluency in L2, which is one of the most persistent problems in SLA, that the development of L2 MC in language instruction becomes crucial. As any other competence such as the grammatical and communicative, it can be taught in the same way. Moreover, Danesi supports the idea of a syllabus based on the notion of conceptual fluency, implemented right from the earliest phases of instruction. The goal is on the one hand that L2 learners are able to recognise metaphors, identifying the source domain (basic experiences) and their

conceptualization in terms of the target domains (abstract phenomena) in L2, as well as be able to incorporate them into their L2 discourse.

Another important scholar in favour of introducing MC in L2 teaching is Frank Boers (2000; 2011), among others. Boer suggests that a cognitive way of building the L2 MC in learners is by proposing activities that enhance language learners' metaphor awareness in the classroom. In other words, it is about making learners conscious of the metaphorical nature of certain idiomatic phrases by highlighting the derived figurative senses of the idioms constituents. In an experiment conducted with intermediate Dutch learners of English, the general aim of raising L2 learners' awareness of metaphors pursued the following objectives: recognition of metaphor as a common ingredient of everyday language, recognition of metaphoric themes behind many idioms, recognition of the non-arbitrary nature of many idioms, recognition of possible cross-cultural difference in metaphoric themes and recognition of cross-linguistic variety in idioms. These objectives were achieved through a number of awareness-raising activities such as asking student to consider L1 about an abstract phenomenon such as love or friendship, or group figurative expressions under more metaphoric themes such as "a local *branch* of this organisation" or "They selectively *pruned* the workforce", which are expressions that belong to the conceptual metaphor SOCIAL ORGANISATION ARE PLANTS. Other activities proposed involve making students guess the meaning of idioms which had a sufficient degree of semantic transparency such as *keep something under one's hat*, which belongs to the conceptual metaphor THE MIND IS A CONTAINER. Further activities emphasised the historical-cultural background of idioms by practising English idioms such as *pass the hat round* or *hang up one's hat*, ; which reflect some national stereotypes such as the English gentleman with his bowler and walking-stick (Boers, 2000: 568).

### **3. Empirical study: Fire as emotion metaphor across native and non-native varieties of English**

This chapter discusses the corpus search and the results obtained, looking first at how the research was conducted, as well as the tools used and the problems encountered. The chapter closes with a presentation of the quantitative and qualitative results, followed by a summary of the conclusions drawn from the analysis.

#### **3.1. Aims and research questions**

Since a large number of aspects of linguistics, including phraseology, can be studied through corpora, a corpus-based study was considered as the most suitable empirical analysis to examine parallelisms and divergences in the use of metaphorical idioms across L1 and L2 varieties of English. In line with previous studies on the use of idioms by NSs and NNSs (Irujo, 1986; Laufer, 2000; Pinnavia, 2010), the main goal of this empirical study is to compare the behaviour of English NSs (L1) and Spanish learners of English as NNSs (L2) in their use of metaphorical idioms with a specific source domain (fire) and a specific target domain (emotions). Accordingly, the main research questions will be addressed:

1. Do users of L2 variant, i.e. Spanish learners of English, use figurative language as frequently as L1 speakers, i.e. NSs of English? Are there any differences between L1 and L2 in the frequency of use of idioms in the oral and the written media?
2. Do NSs of English use metaphorical expressions (one-word and idioms) as frequently as NNSs? Do NNSs avoid using metaphoric idioms to express the proposed conceptual metaphors?

3. What are the most frequently used metaphorical idioms employed by L1 and L2 speakers? What type of idioms are they according to their compositionality?

### **3.2. Methodology, corpora and data extraction**

The research conducted in this study adopted a *Corpus Linguistic* methodology, i.e. the study of language use carried out using evidence from real-life language gathered in a linguistic corpus, as well as a *Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis* methodology, as the most commonly used method in corpus-based researches to compare a native language and an interlanguage (L1 vs. L2) (Granger, 2004). Since one of the main functions of corpora is to provide information about word frequency, this study analysed the quantitative results obtained to draw a qualitative analysis that explained the parallelisms and divergences in the use of a specific type metaphorical idioms between L1 speakers with English as mother tongue and L2 learners with English learned as FL (Spanish students). The data were extracted from two comparable written corpora and two comparable spoken corpora: LOCNESS, ICLE SP, LOCNEC and LINDSEI

The *International Corpus of Learner English* (ICLE) (Granger *et al.* 2009) was used, most specifically its Spanish sub-corpus (ICLE SP), which comprises essays totalling 200.376 words written by Spanish university students. In addition, the L1 speakers' corpus used was the LOCNESS (The *Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays*) (Granger *et al.* 2009), which contains essays written by American and British university students. Considering that LOCNESS contains 288.77 words, in order to make it comparable to the Spanish sub-corpus ICLE SP (200.376 words), the study was limited to three subsection of the LOCNESS UNIV (149,574 words of argumentative essays written by American university students, 18,826 words of literary-mixed essays written by American university students and 59,568 words of argumentative and literary essays written by British university students) making up a total of 227.968 words.



The *Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage* (LINDSEI) (Guilquin *et al.* 2010) was used, in particular its Spanish sub-section (LINDSEI SP), which contains spoken data produced by advanced Spanish speaking learners of English in 50 informal interviews (84.749 words). The comparable corpus used to study the L1 variant is the *Louvain Corpus of Native English Conversation* (LOCNEC) (de Cook, 2004), which comprises informal interviews with NSs of BrE, most of them undergraduate students of linguistics and English language. This corpus contains 50 interviews and 172.533 words.

	<b>LOCNESS</b>	<b>ICLE SP</b>	<b>LOCNEC</b>	<b>LINDSEI SP</b>
<b>NS/NSS</b>	NS (BrE/AmE)	NNS (Spanish)	NS (BrE)	NNS (Spanish)
<b>Words</b>	227.968	200.376	172.533	84.749
<b>Essays/interviews</b>	297	260	51	50
<b>Domain</b>	Written	Written	Spoken	Spoken

Table 2. Features of all four corpora used in the study

### 3.3. Procedure

The first step involved the analysis of the frequency in use of a selection of metaphorical idioms in L1 and L2 varieties of English. For time and space constraints since it had to be done manually, it was not possible to examine the frequency of all the instances of metaphorical idioms used in the corpora. Hence, in line with such previous investigations as Kövecses and Szabó (1996), the search was restricted to those metaphorical idioms with the source domain of fire, in particular those belonging to the conceptual metaphor EMOTION IS HEAT (OF FIRE).

Given the impossibility to automatically retrieve idiomatic expression through corpus linguistic software, the study followed one of the methods for identifying idioms in a corpus (cf. e.g. O’Keefe’s *et al.*, 2007: Greaves and Warren 2010: 216).

Accordingly, “idiomprone” were searched for, that is, words related to a semantic field, such as parts of the body, money, light and colour. Since the study focuses on metaphorical idioms on fire, the “idiomprone” words searched were initially *fire* and *heat*. However, as already explained in chapter two, conceptual metaphors usually motivate the use of a number of words related to fire and heat in the metaphoric expression in which they occur (e.g. *spark off*, *sparks*, *fire*, *flicker*, *burn*, *fan*, *blow*, *steam*, *fuel*, *cold*, *cool*, *melt*, etc.). For this reason, as we shall see, a number of fire/heat-motivated words were also used in the search of all four corpora.

The empirical study is subdivided into two parts: the first part or study 1 analyses the examples found in the written corpora and the second part or study 2 analyses the examples drawn from the spoken corpora. Initially, two criteria on the selection and classification of idioms were established. First, since the concept of fire, and by extension heat (source domain), is associated with the popular metaphorical comprehension of emotions such as anger, love, enthusiasm, energy, desire and conflict (target domains) the conceptual metaphor EMOTIONS IS HEAT (OF FIRE) was chosen as the guiding metaphor of my search. In turn, this conceptual metaphor could be subdivided into ANGER IS FIRE and ANGER IS HEAT, which could trigger a large number of idiomatic expressions such as *bit with anger*, *make one’s blood boil*, *be stewing*, *be seethe with anger*, *be burned up* and *breathe fire*. However, due to time and space constraints, the analysis was restricted to such conceptual metaphors as ANGER IS FIRE, LOVE IS FIRE, IMAGINATION IS FIRE, CONFLICT IS FIRE, ENERGY IS FIRE, ENERGY IS FUEL FOR THE FIRE, ENTHUSIASM IS FIRE, DESIRE IS FIRE and those expressions derived from ANGER IS HEAT only if they contain the word *fire/heat* or any *fire/heat*-motivated words. Second, before preceding to the extraction and classification of samples from the corpora, another important criterion

was implemented. According to Kövecses (2002), the number of metaphorical expressions generated by a conceptual metaphor is larger than that of metaphorical idioms. This occurs because a conceptual metaphor such as ANGER IS FIRE produces both, idioms, i.e. multiword expressions, such as spit fire as in “After the row, he was spitting fire” as well as one-word metaphorical expressions such as *to be fuming* as in “She was fuming”, which is not technically an idiom and therefore cannot not be considered as collective data.

Once the criteria of metaphorical idioms were established, the research continued by creating a list of “idiomprone” words that could help us to extract the idioms from the written corpora. The generated list is based on the metaphorical expressions on *fire/heat* that were found in several sources (See Appendix Section). First, idioms were tracked following Kövecses’ (2002) conceptual metaphors ANGER IS FIRE, LOVE IS FIRE, CONFLICT IS FIRE, ENERGY IS FIRE, ENERGY IS FUEL FOR THE FIRE, ENTHUSIASM IS FIRE, DESIRE IS FIRE, ANGER IS HEAT and ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER. Second, *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* (1998) was used as source dictionary for adding metaphorical idioms on fire to the list, based on its size and scope of coverage (about 7.000 words). In order to provide as many examples as possible of metaphorical expressions on fire/heat from BrE and AmE, the list included other idioms found in four additional English idiom dictionaries: *Oxford Idioms Dictionary* (2004), *The American Heritage dictionary of idioms* (1997), *Collins Cobuild Dictionary* (1995), as well as *The Farlex Dictionary of Idioms*, the largest updated collection of English idioms and slang, containing more than 60,000 entries.

The next step was to produce a word list with all the *fire/heat*-motivated words used in the metaphorical idioms extracted from the aforementioned sources. The

resulting comprehensive list of searchable “idiomprone” words that served as a basis for the empirical analysis is presented in Figure 6 below.

<p>blaze, blazes, blazing, blazed, blow, blows, blew, blowing, blown, boil, boils, boiled, boiling, burn, burns, burned, burnt, burning, candle, candles, catch, catches, catching, caught, chill, coal(s), cold, consume, consumes, consuming, consumed, cool, cross-fire, fan, fans, fanning, fanned, fire(s), fired, fiery, firing, flame, flares, flaring, flared, flames, flicker, fuel, fume, fumes, fuming, fumed, fuse, heat, heated, hot(s), melt, melts, melted, melting, seethe, seethed, seething, seethes, simmer, simmers, simmered, simmering, smoke(s), smo(u)lder, smo(u)lders, smo(u)ldered, smo(u)ldering, spark(off), sparks, sparking, sparked, steam, steams, steamed, steaming, torch, torches</p>
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Figure 6. *Fire/heat*-“idiomprone” words in Oxford (2004), Kövecses’ examples (2002), Collins Cobuild (1995), Cambridge (1994), American Heritage Dictionary (1997) and Farlex Dictionary (online).

Once the criteria of metaphorical idioms were established and the list of “idiomprone” words was generated, the research continued by using such list to extract all examples of metaphorical idioms from the written corpora. This was done with the help of the software AntConc 3.4.1. First, I searched in ICLE SP and LOCNESS all samples of sentences containing the word *fire/heat* lexemes. Second, the different software tools were used to automatically retrieve the linguistic expressions containing the lexemes *fire*, *heat* or any fire/heat-motivated words, as well as all its possible variations, i.e. hyphenation (“a *fire-breathing* orator”), spelling (*smouldering* (BrE) vs. *smoldering* (AmE), morphology such as plural inflection (The *flames of* war spread quickly) or verb inflection (The killing *sparked off* the riot) or variety of the lexical form (*steam/ smoke coming out of both ears*). Next, the examples containing *fire/heat* lexemes were classified according to their literal or figurative use, since the former had

to be later discarded. Metaphoric expressions on fire were also classified taking into account if there were idioms or one-word metaphoric expressions. For instance, in the corpus example “The supreme court sparked the debate” (LOCNEC, 450USARGmrq), although used figuratively, *spark* is a one-word metaphorical expression and therefore cannot count as an idiom. Once the idioms were chosen, the next step was to search their meaning in the dictionaries to classify them according to their “metaphoricity”, that is, whether the idiomatic expression was based on a conceptual metaphor, particularly to that of EMOTION IS HEAT (OF FIRE). For instance, the corpus example “these thoughts *spark up* the issue of values” (LOCNESS, 420USARGmrq.txt) was excluded as the concept *spark up* (‘to begin something (conversation, argument) often suddenly’), although being motivated by a cognitive mechanism, is not metaphor, but conventional knowledge, as fire represents a phenomenon with various aspects, for instance a beginning, thus triggering expression such as *spark up*.

As a final step, the data extracted was presented on an EXCEL document to proceed to the analysis of the results. The EXCEL document contained the following variables:

- (i) the “idiomprone”/key metaphoric word used, the instance of the metaphoric expression as found in the written corpora
- (ii) the variety used the speaker (L1 or L2)
- (iii) the metaphoric expression classified as idioms or one-word metaphoric expression
- (iv) their meanings and level of frequency

In order to conduct study 2, that is, the search in the oral corpora, initially a slightly different approach was intended. After examining previous corpus-based

studies on English idioms in spoken BrE and AmE (Liu, 2003; Simpson & Mendis, 2003; Grant, 2007), an attempt was made to expand on the existing list of “idiomprone” words. However, despite carrying out a time-consuming and meticulous search of the idioms found to be the most recurrent in the previously mentioned studies, only two occurrence of *fire/heat* or any fire/heat-motivated words in the lists provided by the scholars (Grant, 2005). Out of the two idioms, *not hold a candle to* (‘person or thing that is distinctly inferior to someone or something else’) and *heap coals of fire on someone’s head* (‘make a special effort to induce feelings of guilt or remorse in another person’), only the latter could be classified as derivative from the conceptual metaphor EMOTION IS HEAT (OF FIRE). Accordingly, the word *coal(s)* was included in the list.

Due to the scarcity of the new findings, the same ‘idiomprone’ list was used to conduct the search in the two spoken corpora to compare and contrast frequency of idiom usage between NSs (L1) and NNSs (L2). In a similar manner as in study 1, the software AntConc 3.4.1 was employed to identify in LINSEI and LOCNEC all samples of sentences containing the word *fire/heat* and other fire/heat-motivated words as well as all its possible variations, e.g. *burn, burn, burning, burnt*. In the next step, all those examples containing the word *fire/heat* and fire/heat-motivated words that were not used idiomatically were manually classified and later discarded. Once chosen, the idioms extracted from the spoken corpora were checked for meaning in dictionaries and classified according their “metaphoricity”, i.e. whether the idiomatic expression was based on a conceptual metaphor, particularly to that of EMOTION IS HEAT (OF FIRE). As a final step, the data extracted was also presented on an EXCEL document.

### 3.4. Discussions and results

#### 3.4.1. Research question 1.

*Do users of L2 variant, i.e. Spanish learners of English, use figurative language as frequently as L1 speakers, i.e. NSs of English? Are there any differences between L1 and L2 in the frequency of use of idioms in the oral and the written media?*

The first research question tries to identify whether L2 speakers use figurative language as frequently as L1 speakers and whether this frequency is more visible in the written or spoken medium. Taking into account several difficulties that arise in any corpus investigation such as the different size, this study normalised the frequency of idioms found in the corpora per 10,000 words (see Table 3). If the overall aim of the research was to describe and compare the use of metaphorical idioms in L1 and L2 within the framework of the CMT, the number of key-metaphoric words by both speakers (NSs and NNSs) and in both domains (oral and written) gave us some clues. Therefore, the investigation began by searching all possible “idiomprone” words within the domain of *fire/heat*.

L1		L2		L1		L2	
<b>SPOKEN</b>		<b>SPOKEN</b>		<b>WRITTEN</b>		<b>WRITTEN</b>	
<b>(LOCNEC)</b>		<b>(LINDSEI SP)</b>		<b>(LOCNESS)</b>		<b>(ICLESP)</b>	
Raw	Freq.	Raw	Freq.	Raw	Freq.	Raw	Freq.
Freq	per	Freq	per	Freq	per	Freq	per
	10.000		10.000		10.000		10.000
	words		words		words		words
Total	248	14.54	0	263	11.53	122	6.08

Table 3. Frequency of *fire/heat*-motivated words in all four corpora.

Table 3 clearly shows that NNSs tend to underuse *fire/heat* motivated words and the most striking evidence can be observed in the oral domain of NNSs, where the number of occurrences is 0. Although these findings belong to the early stage of the

research, they clearly predict that *fire/heat* lexemes are infrequent in occurrence in all four corpora, especially in the oral corpora of both NSs and NNSs. Consequently, the data also reveal that metaphoric idioms derived from the conceptual metaphor EMOTION IS HEAT (OF FIRE) may be infrequent in use both by NSs and NNSs and in oral and written register. This is in line with prior corpus-based studies of idiomatic expressions (Grant, 2005), which show that the category of idioms on fire does not occur frequently enough to merit inclusion into a frequency list of the most frequently used idioms in BrE and AmE.

The next step consisted in identifying and classifying the “idiomprone” words according to their literal and figurative use (See Table 4). Not surprisingly, the findings confirmed the foreseen low frequency in the use figurative language, especially by NNSs. Nevertheless, two levels of comparison were established. A first level of comparison included comparing the frequency of use of the “idiomprone” words with a figurative meaning between L1 and L2 speakers. As shown in Table 4 below, the difference in the figurative use of *fire/heat* by NSs and NNSs is overall noteworthy, with NSs using figurative expressions almost four times more than NNSs in the written domain. Although the data presented in Table 4 is self-evident, a Chi-Square test was conducted to determine whether the differences observed between L1 and L2 in their use of figurative language were statistically significant. As expected, the Chi-Square results show that the use of *fire/heat* lexemes with a figurative sense was significantly affected by the type of speaker (NS/NNS) both in the written mode ( $\chi^2= 6.3244$ ;  $p<0.05$ ) and spoken mode ( $\chi^2=8.2085$ ;  $p<0.05$ ).

A second level of comparison established was between the types of domains in which the figurative language is used, that is, the oral and written domain.



L1				L2			
WRITTEN ( <i>LOCNESS</i> )				WRITTEN ( <i>ICLESP</i> )			
LIT		FIG		LIT		FIG	
Raw	Freq/	Raw	Freq/	Raw	Freq/	Raw	Freq/
Freq	10.000	Freq	10.000	Freq	10.000	Freq	10.000
	Words		Words		Words		Words
206	9.03	<b>57</b>	<b>2.5</b>	106	5.29	<b>13</b>	<b>0.64</b>
SPOKEN ( <i>LOCNEC</i> )				SPOKEN ( <i>LINDSEI SP</i> )			
LIT		FIG		LIT		FIG	
Raw	Freq/	Raw	Freq/	Raw	Freq/	Raw	Freq/
freq	10.000	freq	10.000	freq	10.000	freq	10.000
	words		words		Words		words
236	13.83	<b>12</b>	<b>0.70</b>	0	0	0	0

Table 4. Literal and figurative use of *fire/heat* and *fire/heat*-motivated words in all four corpora.

As Table 4 shows, overall, NSs use *fire/heat*- motivated with figurative sense far more frequently than NNSs do. However, it also worth noting that, although the underuse of figurative language seems the general rule for both L1 and L2 speakers, in both written and spoken situations, the most evident contrast can be observed in the spoken domain, where L2 speakers use neither literally nor figuratively any of the *fire/heat*-motivated words from the list. These results are in line with previous studies on idiomatic expressions which claim that certain terms are more idiomatically productive than others, as already claimed by other studies such as Pinnavaia (2010). Contrary to what one might expect, *fire/heat* terms, despite being key-words of a series figurative expressions derived from the conventional way of Western and English thinking, proved to be idiomatically unproductive in English since their use is mainly literal. It would also be important to bear in mind that in similar studies conducted, most scholars agree on the fact that even though some idioms are widely recognized in the speech community such as *to be fuming* or *spite fire*, only large corpora can provide access to sufficient empirical data on their use (Grant, 2005; Pinnavia, 2010; Minugh, 2014).

Finally, the poor results of figurative language in the NNSs' discourse seem to corroborate the popular belief that idiomatic expressions constitute one of the most

challenging areas in a FL as well as some previously exposed claims of student's inability to achieve conceptual fluency in the FL as one of the most persistent problems in SLA, as also argued by other researches such as Danesi (1995).

### 3.4.2. Research questions 2.

*Do NSs of English use metaphorical expressions (one-word and idioms) as frequently as NNSs? Do NNSs avoid using metaphoric idioms to express the proposed conceptual metaphors?*

Moving on to use of metaphorical expressions with *fire/heat* as the source domain, the second question analysed the frequency in use of such expressions by NSs and NNS can be seen in the results presented in Table 5.

L1				L2			
WRITTEN ( <i>LOCNESS</i> )				WRITTEN ( <i>ICLE SP</i> )			
<i>One-Word Expressions</i>		<i>Idioms</i>		<i>One-Word Expressions</i>		<i>Idioms</i>	
Raw Freq	Freq/ 10.000 Words	Raw Freq	Freq/ 10.000 Words	Raw Freq	Freq/ 10.000 Words	Raw Freq	Freq/ 10.000 Words
39	<b>1.71</b>	18	<b>0.78</b>	9	<b>0.44</b>	4	<b>0.19</b>
SPOKEN ( <i>LOCNEC</i> )				SPOKEN ( <i>LINDSEI SP</i> )			
<i>One-word expression</i>		<i>Idioms</i>		<i>One-word expression</i>		<i>Idioms</i>	
Raw freq	Freq/ 10.000 words	Raw freq	Freq/ 10.000 words	Raw freq	Freq/ 10.000 words	Raw freq	Freq/ 10.000 words
11	<b>0.64</b>	1	<b>0.05</b>	0	0	0	0

Table 5. Classification of metaphoric expression (one-word expressions and idioms) in all four corpora

On the one hand, once more the results reveal an overall underuse of metaphorical expressions in general, and idioms in particular, by L2 learners in contrast with NSs. The findings, especially the higher frequency of metaphoric expressions by NSs in the written domain, prove that while L1 speakers use idiomatic expressions regularly, L2 learners prove deficient in their use, both in written and oral situations.

These results support previously mentioned studies on conceptual fluency such as Kövecses and Szabó (2002), Danesi (1993, 1995), and seem to confirm that metaphorical conceptualisations seem to be intrinsic feature of NSs' discourse. This is clearly seen in the much larger number of metaphoric expressions obtained in the L1 corpora, LOCNESS AND LOCNEC (69 tokens). In contrast, ICLE SP and LINDSEI show a low frequency of figurative expressions in the written mode (13 tokens) and no occurrences in the speech of NNS. These findings reveal that metaphorical competence does not seem to exist in L2 learners' discourse, as also pointed out by Danesi (1995).

On the other hand, these findings also seem to corroborate Kövecses' (1996) theory about not all metaphorical expressions that are based on conceptual metaphors are idioms. In this respect, Table 5 shows that the word *fire/heat* -motivated words appear more often in one-word metaphorical expressions than in properly defined idioms, that is, multi-word expressions by definition. It can also be observed that the difference in frequency of use between one-word metaphoric expressions and metaphoric idioms is somehow prominent in the written domain of both speakers, with NSs using almost three times more idioms than NNSs. Moreover, such difference becomes noteworthy in the oral domain of NNSs, where the use of idioms becomes totally inexistent.

Finally, closely related to the underuse of metaphorical idioms is the question of avoidance by NNSs. From the findings presented in Table 5, it can be concluded that although the category of idioms is not generally avoided in NNSs' discourse, learners may resort to some strategies in order to overcome the difficulties derived from using metaphorical idioms, as predicted by Laufer (2000). Nevertheless, our examples also suggest that a closer inspection of the data seem necessary in order to find more accurate explanations. For instance, in the examples shown below from ICLE SP,

instead of resorting to any of numerous metaphorical idioms to express the conceptual metaphor EMOTION IS HET(OF FIRE), the student expresses the emotion of ANGER in an alternative way, by using the adjective *angry* preceded by the intensifier *very*.

(1) *It is said that the King was very angry because the play was late.*

(SPM06011.txt)

(2) *Parents are very busy, very tired or very angry to be patient with their children* (SPM01004.txt)

### **3.4.3. Research question 3.**

*What are the most frequently used metaphorical idioms employed by L1 and L2 speakers? What type of idioms are they according to their compositionality?*

Let us now turn to the issue of semantic compositionality of the metaphorical idioms found in each language variant. The final step of the research was to look at the most frequently used metaphorical idioms belonging to the conceptual metaphor EMOTION IS HEAT (OF FIRE) in all four corpora and classify them according to their semantic compositionality. This would indicate whether NSs and NNSs employ compositional and non-compositional idioms in a similar manner.

As can be seen in Table 6, a total number of 25 idioms were found in all four corpora, showing a marked difference between NSs (22 idioms) and NNSs (3 idioms). These findings seem to back up the already described predominance of the metaphoric competence (MC), both in number and creativity, in L1 idiom processing (Littlemore and Low, 2006), which is self-evident in our findings.

L1		L2		L1		L2
WRITTEN (LOCNESS)		WRITTEN (ICLE SP)		SPOKEN (LOCNES)		SPOKEN (LINDSEI SP)
Idiom	Token	Idiom	Token	Idiom	Token	
in the heat of the moment	3	burned out	1	melting pot	1	
flare out of control	1	quick-fire	1			
under fire	2	light up	1			
flare up	1					
to be hot and cold	1					
spark someone's imagination	1					
spark off	1					
consumed with anger	1					
chill out	1					
be blown away	4					
blown-up	1					
blown out	1					
melting pot	1					
flames and rage	1					
spark someone into	1					
TOTAL	21		3		1	0

Table 6. Metaphorical idioms derived from EMOTION IS HEAT (OF FIRE)

Regarding the semantic composition of the idioms used, the originality of metaphoric idioms produced seems highly present in the NSs' corpora and largely absent in NNSs' discourse. This can be easily seen in the wide range of metaphoric idioms employed by NSs (see Table 6). In line with the different classifications provided at the beginning of this dissertation, it can be concluded that NSs use wide variety of linguistic forms of idioms, including phrasal verbs, pair words and metaphors. In agreement with the different classifications of idioms also presented earlier in the thesis, (Cacciari and Glucksberg, 1991; Nunberg, 1994; Kövecses and Szabó, 1996; Fillmore, 1998), it can be said that the idioms used by NSs seem fairly balanced in terms of their compositionality, that is, there are idiomatic expressions where parts of

the idiomatic meaning can be put in correspondence with parts of the literal meaning, e.g. *in the heat of the moment*, and idiomatic phrases, where no such correspondences can be established, such as *blown out*. Equally balanced are the idioms in terms of their of transparency, that is, there are opaque idioms, where there is no relation between the idioms' constituent and the idiom's meaning, e.g. *blown away*, transparent idioms, where the relation is transparent, such as *flare out of control* and quasi-metaphorical idioms, where the meaning is conveyed cognitively through their allusional content, e.g. *consumed with anger*.

	<b>Kövecses (2002)</b>	<b>Nunberg et al. (1994)</b>	<b>Fillmore et al. (1990)</b>	<b>Cacciari &amp; Glucksberg (1991)</b>	<b>Cacciari &amp; Glucksbert (1991)</b>
<b>be blown away</b>	phrasal vb	idiomatic phrase	decoding	opaque	partially compositional
<b>blown out</b>	phrasal vb	idiomatic phrase	decoding	opaque	partially compositional
<b>blown-up</b>	phrasal vb	idiomatic phrase	decoding	opaque	partially compositional
<b>chill out</b>	phrasal vb	idiomatic phrase	decoding	opaque	partially compositional
<b>consumed with anger</b>	metaphor	idiomatically combining expression	encoding	quasi- metaphorical	fully compositional
<b>flames and rage</b>	pair of words	idiomatic phrase	encoding	transparent	fully compositional
<b>flare out of control</b>	metaphor	idiomatically combining expression	decoding	transparent	fully compositional
<b>flare up</b>	phrasal vb	idiomatic phrase	decoding	opaque	partially compositional
<b>in the heat of the moment</b>	metaphor	idiomatically combining expression	encoding	quasi- metaphorical	fully compositional
<b>under fire</b>	metaphor	idiomatic phrase	decoding	opaque	partially compositional
<b>spark off</b>	phrasal vb	idiomatic phrase	decoding	opaque	partially compositional
<b>melting pot</b>	metaphor	idiomatically combining expression	encoding	quasi- metaphorical	fully compositional
<b>spark someone's imagination</b>	metaphor	idiomatically combining expression	encoding	quasi- metaphorical	fully compositional
<b>to be hot and cold</b>	pair of words	idiomatically combining expression	encoding	quasi- metaphorical	fully compositional

Table 7. Classification of metaphoric idioms in NSs' corpora

In order to draw some conclusions on the relationship between metaphor and idiom processing skills and their transfer from L1 to L2, the next analysis is centred around a tentative classification of the few occurrences of metaphoric idioms based on EMOTION IS HEAT (OF FIRE) in L2. The first metaphoric idiom in L2 found was:

- (3) “I believe that without respect to persons life [it] (force of anybody to get engaged) would be **burned out**, without upward movement.” (SPM04039.t)

In this type of idioms, the conceptual metaphor ENTHUSIASM IS FIRE seems to trigger the metaphoric expression “burn out”. According to Kövecses (2002) phrasal verbs are a types of linguistic expressions that can be subscribed to the category of idioms. Coupled to this, Laufer’s classification (2000) classifies the idiom as type 1, that is, the idiom exhibits the highest degree similarity, and therefore translation, between the FL idiom (‘to do something so long and so intensely that one gets sick and tired of it’) and its counterpart in the learner’s first language ‘estar quemdado/quemarse’). The acquisition and use of this type of idioms was earlier explained by Lionta’s Idiom Diffusion Model of Second Language, according to which lexical level idioms such as “burn out” have a first language equivalent, that is, there is a one-to-one match between English and Spanish, and therefore easier to understand and produce. This type of idioms seems also the case of our next example:

- (4) “People **light up** their eyes, open their mouths and listen carefully to everything that is said in this communication medium.” (SPM03006.txt)

In line with findings from several experiments with L2 learners (Irujo, 1986; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993, cit. in Cieslicka, 2015: 216), cross language similarities and context, together with its direct translation into Spanish (‘iluminarse’) and similar meaning (‘to become animated or cheerful’), prove once again how the comprehension and

production of L2 identical idioms or similar in form and meaning to their Spanish equivalents were easier for L2 learners.

To a different conceptual metaphor (CONFLICT IS FIRE) belongs the next example “quick-fire”:

- (5) “Shortening the mandatory military service resembles a **quick fire fix**”  
(SPM04055.txt)

However, when analysing the idiom and its meaning rigorously, as well as its textual context, it appeared to be an inaccurate use of the idiomatic expression. In English, “quick-fire” is used to describe something that is ‘happening very quickly, one after another’, e.g., “His quick-fire jokes were very popular with the audience” (*Cambridge Dictionary online*. Retrieved on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019). In contrast, in English “quick-fix” is used to refer to ‘something that seems to be a fast and easy solution to a problem but is in fact not a very good solution’, whose Spanish translation would be “solución rápida” (*Cambridge Dictionary online*. Retrieved on May, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019). Upon analysing the examples from the corpus, the use of “quick fire” collocated with the noun “fix” made no sense to the researcher. Even though the idiom used by the student does not belong to the conceptual metaphor CONFLICT IS FIRE, it is worth looking at it from an SLA perspective as it supports the findings of earlier mentioned studies such as Irujo’s negative transfer theory (1986). The choice of “quick-fire fix” instead of *quick-fix* shows that while comprehension of identical/similar idioms in form and meaning to their Spanish equivalents are easier for L2 learners, in the production tasks similar idioms proved to be more liable to inference from their mother tongue (Irujo, 1986).

In the search for divergences in frequency use between the oral and written domains, findings show that the low frequency of idiom use seem a mark of NNSs’



discourse, especially in the spoken domain. Whereas L1 speakers use pure idioms such as (6) “in the heat of the moment” (LOCNESS 554USARscu.txt, 554USARscu.txt) and (7) “hot and cold” (LOCNESS, 338BRSUR1.txt), which are, according to Moon, more likely to appear in written discourse (Moon, 1988, cit. in Liu, 2003), L2 speakers include informal idioms such as “blow away” (SPM04038.txt) in a formal written context. These findings highlight the importance of teaching not only the cognitive structure of L1 constructions (forms and meanings) but also exemplifying them in different registers, a kind of knowledge that is largely unconscious in NSs (8) (LOCNEC, “oh dear I've totally blown it really, AE31.txt).

To round off the analysis, these findings seem to corroborate the proposed theories on the avoidance of idioms usage among FL learners to overcome this linguistic difficulty (Laufer, 2000). As seen, idioms are not avoided as a category, since we found some examples of idioms in NNSs’ written corpora, even though in most cases their metaphoricity was not strictly related to the conceptual metaphor EMOTION IS HEAT (OF FIRE). Previous studies have also shown that proficiency in the FL (Laufer, 2000) and age (Littlemore and Low, 2001) are determinant factors in the use of metaphoric idioms. This investigation confirms that both L2 proficiency and age seem to be important factors in idiom avoidance since both, ICLE AND LINDSEI, specifically their Spanish components, contain data produced by university students, in their twenties, with a high intermediate to advance level of English. Results from Table 5 show that the conceptual fluency already exists in learners’ first language (Littlemore and Low, 1996), as proved by the timid number of metaphoric one-word expressions in ICLE SP ((9) “chilling average”, SPM05022.txt; (10) “cold and difficult reality”, SPM04005.txt, (11) “cold brains”, SPM04029.txt).

Nevertheless, results also show that learners find it difficult to incorporate the conceptualisation of the source domain of fire to that of the target domain of emotions in the form of idioms, that is, multi-word expressions. Such findings seem to support Boer's (2000) theory that learners need to be conscious of the metaphorical nature of certain idiomatic phrases in L1 by highlighting the derived figurative senses of the idioms constituents. They also provide evidence for the benefits of the contrastive analysis in idiom acquisition by NN learners of English, as posited by Ruiz de Mendoza and Agustin Lach's (2016: 75). In other words, when learning idiomatic expressions, a contrastive analysis that invites learners to look into the L2 constructions and find its equivalent in their first language should be encouraged, followed, of course, by extensive practice to automatise the knowledge obtained after being exposed to the idiomatic expressions and explicit explanations.

#### **4. Conclusions and suggestions for further research**

In the present study an attempt has been made to explore idioms from a metaphoric perspective and to show how they are acquired and used across L1 and L2 varieties of English. At the same time, the study shows the importance of metaphoric competence (MC) in the processes of learning of idioms by L2 learners. After providing a review of the theoretical foundations of idioms, their nature and semantic classification and their traditional and cognitive approaches (Conceptual Metaphor Theory), an empirical study was conducted, in order to explore the understanding and processing of idioms in L1 and L2, especially with regard to the issues of idiom avoidance and the pedagogical implications of idioms use and learning. The analysis focused on the frequency of use of a selection of metaphorical idioms on fire in L1 (NS) and L2 (NNS) variants across speech and writing with the purpose of answering three research questions.

The first research question tried to identify whether L2 speakers use figurative language as frequently as L1 speakers and whether this frequency is more visible in the written or spoken medium. In line with prior corpus-based studies on idiomatic expressions (Grant, 2005), the data revealed that metaphoric idioms derived from the conceptual metaphor EMOTION IS HEAT (OF FIRE) are infrequent in use both by NSs and NNSs and in oral and written register. In addition, the findings proved a low frequency in the use figurative language, especially by NNSs. The most evident contrast was found in the spoken domain, where L2 speakers use neither literally nor figuratively any of the *fire/heat*-motivated words from the list.

The second research question analysed the frequency in use of metaphoric expressions by NSs and NNS. Results revealed an overall underuse of metaphorical expressions in general, and idioms in particular, by L2 learners in contrast with NSs. The higher frequency of metaphoric expressions used by NSs in the written domain contrast sharply with that used by L2 learners, who prove deficient in their use, both in written and oral situations. Closely related to the underuse of metaphorical idioms is the question of avoidance by NNSs. From the findings presented, it can be concluded that although the category of idioms is not generally avoided in NNSs' discourse, learners of English as FL usually avoid metaphorical idioms.

The third and last research question looked at the semantic compositionality of the most frequently used metaphorical idioms derived from the conceptual metaphor EMOTIONS IS HEAT(OF FIRE) that were found in all four corpora, as well as the subsequent classification according to their semantic compositionality. The number and originality of metaphoric idioms produced seem far more prominent in the NSs' corpora (22 idioms) than in NNSs' corpora (3 idioms). Coupled to the wide range of metaphoric idioms employed by NSs, which include phrasal verbs, pair words and metaphors, is the

fair balance found in terms of their compositionality (idiomatically combining expressions and idiomatic phrases), as well as their transparency (opaque, transparent and quasi-metaphorical idioms). Despite the limited size of our sample, the analysis of the metaphoric idioms found, served us to compare and comment on their use patterns in L1 and L2.

Two important conclusions can be drawn from the analysis. First, there is a clear lack of conceptual richness in the discourse of NNSs compared to NSs' discourse. The overall frequencies in all four corpora revealed that, as expected, NNSs tend to underuse metaphoric expressions in general and idioms in particular, compared to NSs. These are findings that coincide with those of previous studies (Irujo, 1986; Danesi, 1992, 1995; Boers, 2011), which explain that the marked difference in the use of idioms by NSs and NNSs is mainly due to the fact that metaphoric-figurative language has been neglected in L2 teaching. The same studies also justify that the rare occurrence of metaphoric idioms in NNSs' corpora is due to factors such as L2 proficiency, age, range and representativeness of the sampled texts. These are factors which probably have influenced the low frequency of use of idioms in the NNSs corpora used, as both the subjects, university students in their twenties with an advanced level of English, as well as the range and representativeness of the sampled texts included, 260 argumentative essays and 50 informal interviews, proved to be deficient and insufficient to investigate a rare phenomenon such as idioms. Moreover, in agreement with previous studies on the use of idioms by L2 learners (Irujo, 1996), our findings seem to prove that L2 learners encounter such difficulty using English idioms that they often prefer to avoid them altogether. In this respect, the empirical study also served to underscore L2 learners' difficulty to achieve conceptual fluency in the FL.

Second, with regard to the general analysis of metaphoric idioms in the strict sense of multiword expressions, it can be concluded that as Minugh (2014:49) claimed “Corpus size does matter”. The size of the four corpora used in this empirical study proved clearly insufficient to achieve a reasonable number of examples to be examined. For instance, the NSSs’ corpora, LOCNESS AND LOCNEC, did not contain a significant number of idioms to study neither the variability of idioms, particularly through context, nor their compositionality. In addition, the NSSs’ corpora provided only a few occurrences of the specific metaphoric idioms searched. Here, it appears likely that only bigger corpora such as MICASE, COCA, BNC, to name just a few, will be large enough to begin to satisfy that criterion.

In any case, this BA dissertation constitutes a first step in the analysis of the role played by metaphors in the understanding and use of idioms by L1 and L2 learners. Having explained that idioms in the mother tongue (Spanish) and FL (English) are conceptually similar and the category of idioms is not generally avoided (Laufer, 2000), it seems necessary to find out why L2 learners do not use them as frequently as L1 speakers. Even though this study illustrates the advantages of using corpora as tools to explore and better understand the use of phraseology, in this case idioms, in a given language, it would also be interesting to conduct some studies with subjects to measure the impact of idiom teaching proposals such as Pedagogical Grammar (PG) approach (Ruiz de Mendoza and Agustin Lach, 2016), which presents L2 pedagogical strategies based on raising students’ awareness of their native language and L2 differences. Furthermore, it would be interesting to expand this research to deep on the analysis of avoidance to identify the apparent reasons for it as well as the most common pattern of avoidance. Other important aspects of research would be to compare different

interlanguages and possible reasons for the underuse of idioms to offer further pedagogical implications and future directions for research.

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## APPENDIX A

<i>Kövecses' metaphorical idioms (2002)</i>	
<b>fire and heat idiom</b>	<b>fire and heat- motivated words</b>
burn the candle at both ends	burn, candle
to be burning with love	burning
burning with excitement/anger	burning
someone catches fire	catch fire
(imagination) to catch fire	fire
fan the flames of (someone's enthusiasm)	flames
spitting fire	fire
set fire to (someone's imagination)	fire
to stoke someone's fire	fire
the fire between two people goes out	fire, go out
flames go from our relationship	flames
flames of war spread quickly	flames
imagination to be on fire	on fire
smoke coming out of one's ears	smoke
smouldering with anger	smouldering
spark off the riot	spark off
last sparks of	sparks
carry a torch for someone	torch
blow your stack	blow
boil with anger	boil
make one's blood boil	boil
breath fire	fire
get all steam up	steam

<i>Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms (1998)</i>	
<b>fire and heat idiom</b>	<b>fire and heat-motivated words</b>
blow your stock/top	blow
blow a fuse/gasket	blow
blow off/let off steam	blow
reaching boiling point	boiling
do a slow burn	burn
burn the candle at both ends	burn, candle
in the cold light of the day	cold
fan the flames	fan
fire in your belly	fire
breathe fire	fire
light your fire	fire
add fuel to the fire/flames	fire
an old flame	flame
fan the flames	flames
in the heat of the moment	heat
hot and bothered	hot
hot and heavy	hot
hot under the collar	hot
hot button	hot
be hot stuff	hot
be in hot water	hot
hot-to-trot	hot
to have the hots for somebody	hots
a spark plug	spark
sparks fly	sparks
run out of steam/gas	steam
carry a torch for somebody	torch

<i><b>Oxford Idiom 's Dictionary (2004)</b></i>	
<b>fire and heat</b>	<b>fire and fire-motivated words</b>
blow a fuse/gasket	blow
blow your top	blow
blow your cool	blow
blow hot and cold	blow, hot
let/blow off your steam	blow, steam
a slow burn	burn
burn the candle at both ends	burn, candle
blow your cool	cool
a ball of fire	fire
breath fire	fire
catch fire	fire
set the heather on fire	fire
fire in the belly	fire
old flame	flame
like a moth to the flame	flame
add fuel to a fire	fuel, fire
hot and bothered	hot
go hot and cold	hot
hot and heavy	hot
hot to trot	hot
hot under the collar	hot
have the hots for	hots
sparks fly	sparks
strike sparks of each other	sparks
have steam coming out of your/from years	steam
blow off/let off steam	steam
run out of steam	steam
carry a torch for somebody	torch
get on someone's wick	wick

<i>Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms (1995)</i>	
<b>fire and heat idiom</b>	<b>fire and fire-motivated words</b>
be blazing with anger	blazing
make your blood boil	boil
come to the /bring something to the boil	boil
(feeling) be on the boil	boil
boiling point	boil
burn the candle at both ends	burn, candle
be burning with resentment/anger	burning
(make someone feel) hot and cold	cold
fan the flames	fan, flames
breathe fire	fire
(an event) catch(es) fire	fire
fire in your belly	fire
the fat is in the fire	fire
not set the world on fire	fire
out of the frying pan into the fire	fire
set the heather on fire	fire
in the firing line	firing
an old flame	flame
(feel) a flicker of regret/surprise(emotion)	flicker
flare up	flare
add fuel to the fire/flames	fuel, flames
fuel the flames	fuel, flames
light the fuse	fuse
have a short fuse	fuse
in the heat of an argument/the moment	heat
hot and bothered	hot
(make someone feel) hot and cold	hot
have the hots for someone	hots
(emotion) melt away	melt
give someone a roasting	roast
smoke and mirrors	smoke

smoulder with resentment	smoulder
a bright spark	spark
sparks fly	sparks
strike sparks off at each other	sparks
spark off	spark

<i>McGraw-Hill Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs (2005)</i>	
<b>fire and heat idiom</b>	<b>fire and fire-motivated words</b>
blow up	blow
blow one's fuse/gasket/cork/lid/top/stack	blow, fuse
blow off steam	blow, steam
boil over/boil (with anger)	boil
burn somebody up	burn
burn for something/someone	burn
burn the candle at both ends	burn, candle
burn with a low blue flame	burn, flame
burn with a low blue flame	burn, flame
to be caught in the middle (of a cross-fire)	caught, cross-fire
chill out	chill
fire somebody up	fire
fire someone with anger/fire/enthusiasm/hope/expectations	fire
fat hits the fire	fire
on fire	fire
out of a frying pan into the fire	fire
set the world on fire	fire
set someone on fire	fire
ball of fire	fire, fireball
Fireball	fireball
flame/blaze with anger/resentment/lust/vengeance	flame, blaze
flare up at somebody/something	flare
fume about/over something	fume

add fuel to the fire/flame	fuel, fire, flame
blow one' fuse	fuse
hot and heavy	hot
hot and bothered	hot
hot under the collar	hot
hots and heavy	hots
spark off (activity)	spark
get up a full head of steam	steam
steam someone's beam	steam
steam someone up	steam
let off steam/blow off steam	steam, blow
get steamed up	steamed
steaming (mad)	steaming
carry a torch for somebody	torch
simmer down	simmer

**Formulario de delimitación de título e resumo**  
Traballo de Fin de Grao curso 2017/2018

APELIDOS E NOME:	ALONSO SALINAS, AMBAR VALERIA
GRAO EN:	LINGUA E LITERATURA INGLESAS
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TITOR/A:	MARIA DE LOS ANGELES GOMEZ GONZALEZ
LIÑA TEMÁTICA ASIGNADA:	GRAMÁTICA

SOLICITO a aprobación do seguinte título e resumo:

**Título:** Metaphor in the acquisition and use of idioms in English as L1 and L2

**Resumo** [na lingua en que se vai redactar o TFG; entre 1000 e 2000 caracteres]:

Many teachers and learners would agree that idioms constitute one of the most difficult areas of any foreign language. In view of this, the teaching and learning of idioms have received a great deal of attention in cognitive linguistics, and especially in cognitive semantics. Many figurative language scholars advocating such approaches have acknowledged that idioms do not exist as separate semantic units within the lexicon, but rather they reflect coherent metaphorical concepts (Gibbs, 1993, 1994).

The goal of this TFG is to explain English idioms from a metaphoric perspective and to show how they are acquired and used in the contexts of L1 and L2 teaching and learning, highlighting the importance of metaphoric competence (MC). In order to do so I will assess the importance of MC in language education with the intention of not only showing that metaphor is involved in every area that language learners need to use, understand or learn (Littlemore, 2006), but also that idioms in English constitute a significant part of human cognition (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), thereby becoming products of a conceptual system (Kövecses & Szabó, 1986).

Ultimately, this study intends to raise awareness about metaphor and to stimulate an active metaphorical thinking among EFL learners and teachers with regard to not only idioms, but also other aspects of figurative language in English.

Santiago de Compostela, 6 de Novembro de 2017.

SRA. DECANA DA FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA (Presidenta da Comisión de Títulos de Grao)

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